

How to Write a Sonnet

What is a Sonnet?

A sonnet is a special type of poem that was made popular by William Shakespeare. Unlike other styles of poetry that don't have to rhyme or follow a structure, a sonnet has a very specific configuration of rhyme and rhythm. Originally, sonnets were written in Italian, but Shakespeare made them recognisable by writing more than 150 of them! They were often about love, but he also included sonnets in his plays.

Rhyme Time

One of the first things you will need to be able to do to write a sonnet is follow the rhyme scheme. A rhyme scheme is a pattern of rhyming sounds in a poem. When writing your sonnet, the rhyme scheme will be: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. You can practice by just coming up with rhyming words in this pattern before writing the full lines of your poem. Look at the example below to see how the pattern works:

A - Floor

B - Lane

A - Door

B - Pain

C - Hat

D - Tree

C - Flat

D - See

E - Sky

F - Blue

E - Eye

F - Through

G - Hair

G - There



A traditional sonnet has 14 lines, made up of 4 stanzas. A stanza is almost like a paragraph. The first three stanzas have *four lines*; these are called quatrains ('quad' means 'four') and the last stanza has *two lines* called a couplet (think of 'couple' as being two).

Chained to the Rhythm

Once you have figured out the rhyme scheme and structure, it's time to apply the correct *meter* to your sonnet. Meter is a unit of rhythm for a poem. Think of it like a beat in music. It describes the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables or sounds. To figure out which syllable is stressed, try saying a word out loud like 'window'. Do you say **WIN**-dow or win-**DOW**? Can you hear that it sounds strange to stress the second syllable? In the word 'window' the first syllable is emphasised or stressed. Short, connecting words like 'the' and 'to' are usually unstressed.

A Shakespearean sonnet uses a meter called an *iambic pentameter*. This meter has five 'iambs' in each line. An iamb is two syllables: an unstressed one, then a stressed one. It sounds like this: da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM. I have written an example so you can see the rhyme and rhythm pattern. I find it helps to count out the beats on my fingers as I read it.

The Cats

The cat next door had piercing eyes of green
His fluffy coat was streaked with black and white.
He crept and prowled about, he moved unseen,
He hid himself cloaked in the dark of night.

But someone noticed him as he lurked there,
Another creature who had caught his scent,
Their ears pricked up and on end stood their hair,
And quickly out towards the grass they went.

The cat lay low beside the red brick wall
And heard the sound of padding paws nearby,
So bravely t'wards the creature did he crawl,
And what great vision there should greet his eye?

It's only Spot, his friend and not a foe,
So off into the night the pair do go.

By Lucy Allen